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# POMPEIAN FRESCOS

With an introduction & notes by Trewin Copplestone

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Front Cover *Naples, National Museum. From Pompeii*

## Portrait of a man and his wife

There has been some considerable speculation on the identity of the two figures represented in this sensitive painting, probably the finest example of portraiture found in Pompeii. It had been held to be a portrait of P. Paquius Proculus, an official, the scroll he is holding lending some support to this view. The woman is obviously his wife. The painting was discovered on the wall of the *tablinum* (main room) in a house attached to a bakery, and careful rendering of the features led to further enquiries which suggest that this is a portrait of the baker and his wife. There is no record of the house having been inhabited by anyone else, and it is extremely unlikely that he would have had a painting of the patrician Proculus on his wall. There is some indication that his name was Terentius.

The internal evidence of the painting suggests this reading, since he is obviously of the artisan class with the typical high cheekbones, somewhat heavy, vacuous stare, loose mouth and projecting ears. His wife shows the shrewdness of a business wife accustomed to taking charge of her husband's affairs. The evidence of education and position, scroll, stylus and tablets, may be accounted for by the natural and persistent desire of the artisan to assume the air of letters; it is not uncommon to find this in Roman painting. That the painting itself encourages one to make this analysis is evidence of its quality. It is painted with directness and assurance, and the balance of light and dark is sensitively handled. There is a not unusual lack of drawing in the hands, but this is more than counteracted by the careful handling of the light and shade and modelling of the features.



# INTRODUCTION

The beauty of Naples is proverbial. A Greek settlement from early times, it occupies one of the superlative sites of the Mediterranean, banked on a hill overlooking the fine sweeping blue bay in which sit the inviting sentinel islands of Ischia and Capri. Away to the left a rich plain, fertile and cultivated, is backed by mountains, and if over the nearest hangs what seems to be a cloud in a cloudless sky, strange as it is, it may be ignored for the beauty of the scene in the strong sunlight which catches the white faces of the villas nestling along the shores of the bay. And so it has been, one feels, since those first Greek explorers were seduced by its beauty and recognised its virtue as a trading post.

Yet the mountain is Vesuvius, an active volcano—the one active volcano on the mainland of Europe—which has not been entirely silent since its last major eruption 200 years ago. The Neapolitan may ignore it, but he is aware that the cloud is a reminder of the history of destruction that started many thousands of years ago and may not yet be over. Accompanying the eruptions were earthquakes, and the coastline must have altered several times in history; the bay itself may be the result of some vast early explosion. The loss of life has been tremendous. In 1631, although warned by preliminary rumblings, some 4,000 people perished. Since then there have been forceful explosions in 1766, 1779, 1794, 1822 and 1906, all resulting in loss of life and property.

The most famous of the eruptions occurred on the 24th August A.D. 79, when the top of Vesuvius blew off and buried in volcanic ash and pebbles, known as *lapilli*, the three towns of Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae, with all the surrounding countryside and the villas dotted over it. The loss of life, although considerable, was not as great as the destruction of property. Most of the people of Herculaneum had time to flee to Naples two miles away, and in Pompeii probably less than a fifth of the fifteen thousand inhabitants died.

There are graphic descriptions of the explosion. Pliny the Younger wrote his description of the scene in two famous letters to Tacitus. He was mainly concerned to tell of the death, in the poisonous fumes which spread over a wide area, of his famous uncle, and does not dwell on the whole scene of terror as in the following account from Xiphilinus's *Epitome of Dion*:

*Descriptions of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius*

*In the Autumnal Season, some strange and frightful Things happened in the Campania, for all of a sudden there broke out a great Fire from Vesuvius... There appeared many great Men exceeding the common Size of Mankind, and such as Giants are described to be. They were seen in the Mountains and neighbouring Countries, and wandering up and down in the Towns adjacent, and likewise in the Air. After this there happened a great Drought from the extraordinary Heat and violent Earthquake, so that the whole Plains dried up and the Tops of the Hills subsided. The Noise underground was like Thunder, and on the Surface of the Earth it was like the Lowing of Cattle. The Sea raged, and the Heavens resounded, and an unusual Noise was heard, as if Mountains clashed together. Then, for the first time, Stones of an extraordinary Size were thrown out of the Top, attended with Fire and Smoke, so that the Air was darkened thereby, and the Sun was hidden, as in the time of an Eclipse. Night sprung from Day, and Light from Darkness, and People imagined that the Giants had rebelled, as Images of them were seen in the Smoke, and the Sound of Trumpets was heard. Others thought that Chaos was come again, and that the general Conflagration was at hand. These Things made People run out of their Houses and into the Streets, and those who were on the Streets go within Doors. Those who were on Shipboard went ashore, and those on Land went aboard, every one thinking that any Situation was better than their present one. And along with all this, there were such Quantities of Ashes as possessed all Space, Earth, Sea and Air; and wherever it happened it did hurt both to Men, the Cattle, and the Grounds, and the Fishes, and all the Birds were destroyed. The two Cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii were entirely overwhelmed while the People were sitting in the Theatre.*

Pliny speaks from close quarters:

*Tho' it was now Morning, the Light was exceedingly faint and languid; the Buildings all around us tottered, and though we stood upon open Ground, yet as the Place was narrow and confined, there was no remaining there without certain and great Danger: we therefore resolved to quit the Town. The People followed us in the utmost Consternation, and (as to a Mind distracted with Terror, every suggestion seems more prudent*





than its own) pressed in great Crowds about us in our Way out. Being got at a convenient Distance from the Houses, we stood still, in the Midst of a most dangerous and dreadful Scene. The Chariots which we had ordered to be drawn out, were so agitated backwards and forwards, though upon the most level Ground, that we could not keep them steady, even by supporting them with large Stones. The sea seemed to roll back upon itself, and to be driven from its Banks by the convulsive Motion of the Earth; it is certain at least that the Shore was considerably enlarged, and several Sea Animals were left upon it. On the other side a black and dreadful Cloud bursting with an igneous serpentine Vapour, darted out a long Train of Fire, resembling Flashes of Lightening, but much larger... Soon after the cloud seemed to descend and cover the whole Ocean; as indeed it entirely hid the Island of Capri... Nothing was then to be heard but the Shrieks of Women, the Screams of Children and the Cries of Men... the greater part imagining that the last and eternal Night was come, which was to destroy both the Gods and the World together.

And thus ended the gay world of Pompeii and Herculaneum: buried, in two days of terror, under a thick layer of volcanic ash, it died. Herculaneum, nearer the eruption, lay forty-five feet under hardening volcanic ash and mud, and was inaccessible to the owners who wandered around looking for their belongings and the sites of their homes. Pompeii was more fortunate for only twenty-four feet covered the town, and the tops of the taller buildings round the Forum were still visible. This enabled some Pompeians to locate their homes and to remove valuables although it was apparent that they could never live there again. The parts of the buildings above ground were used for building elsewhere and the public statues and pictures were removed so that little of value was left on the Forum site.

Weeds grew, wind and rain deposited soil, and cultivation began again with some ruins marking the sites. These eventually vanished and after centuries nothing remained. The memory of the place began to dim and the knowledge of the sites was lost in the Middle Ages, only the feeble rumblings of the tired Vesuvius being a reminder of the past glories and grandeur of the wealthy cities.

The destruction of the Roman Empire and the development of a Christian society, which was not interested in the splendour of pagan Rome, naturally diminished any interest there might have been. Even in the Renaissance, when a renewed interest might have been expected, it was only slowly that concern for the cities' fate increased; they are mentioned at the end of the 15th century and they began to appear on maps in the 16th century. At the end of the 16th century a famous architect, Fontana, was employed to carry a water supply by conduit to a village which lacked a proper supply. He planned to drive the tunnel through the hill which, unknown to him, contained the buried Pompeii. Remains were found, but no conclusions were drawn from them at the time, although it was realised that some ancient place lay buried beneath.

Although speculations and some accurate guesses continued, it was not until the 18th century that any consistent and systematic excavation began.

The first evidence of the sites came from the accidental discovery of small pieces of sculpture or fine marble paving during the sinking of wells by the local inhabitants. These things were sold and came into the hands of scholars and connoisseurs; the most notable of these was Prince d'Elbœuf who bought the land on which some of the finest pieces had been discovered in 1712. He set to work energetically, and some important sculptures were uncovered. Since, however, archaeology was not yet even in its infancy and the discoveries were made at a depth of fifty feet or so purely by chance digging, no attempt was made to correlate the information obtained. Originally it was thought that Pompeii lay beneath, and it was not until 1738 that the discovery of an inscription revealed that it was Herculaneum. It was not until ten years later that digging beneath the hill of Civita uncovered the remains of Pompeii, and on the 19th April 1748 the discovery of a skeleton, by the side of which a number of silver and gold coins were scattered, aroused both curiosity and greed, so that work continued with redoubled energy. Any site that seemed possible was tackled, and if it did not prove rewarding was filled in and left, anything worth taking being removed without recording its position. Excavations continued, alternating between Herculaneum and Pompeii as exciting finds were made at either place, during the whole of the century. Some scholars condemned the casual irresponsibility of the work, and some made attempts to categorise the finds; but enormous and irreparable damage was done through ignorance.

In the middle years of the century J. J. Winckelmann, with a passionate interest in historical remains, came from Dresden to Naples where, despite the animosity of Italians and Spaniards, he studied the remains, and by his writings was the first to spread information about them throughout Europe. Sir William Hamilton, whose second wife was the celebrated Emma, was ambassador to the Naples court

*After the eruption*

*Excavation of the buried cities*



from 1764 to 1800, and, a keen amateur of the arts, he also helped in the dissemination of interest in England.

Excavations were carried on enthusiastically or spasmodically according to the attitudes of the different rulers in Naples throughout the great changes in Europe brought about by the French Revolution and the career of Napoleon. French power was responsible for some of the works from Pompeii and Herculaneum finding their way to Paris, while Hamilton's fine collection was eventually acquired by the British Museum. Important discoveries were occasionally made, like the Alexander Mosaic in the House of the Faun in 1831.

It was not, however, until King Victor Emmanuel put Giuseppe Fiorelli in charge, with a labour force of over five hundred workers, that systematic excavation and the collation of the information gained could be said to have started. This was in 1860, and the work has gone on ever since. There is still much to be done, but Fiorelli's contribution was immensely important. He divided the city into regions and made a prospective map of the street plan. On the basis of this he began clearing away from the top, gradually uncovering the buildings. The previous method had been to tunnel along the streets and dig into the houses leaving the mass of ground above which frequently collapsed into the empty buildings bringing down the walls with it. This had not mattered to the early excavators since they only intended to rip out the interior decorations, but Fiorelli preserved the buildings intact, replacing the furniture where it had been found and beginning the re-creation of the city which makes Pompeii such a uniquely fascinating museum. Fiorelli also devised the method of filling the space left in the hardened ash by the vanished bodies of the victims with plaster of paris from which a graphic picture of the death agony of man and beast has been gained. In recent years the reconstruction of Pompeii under Professor Maiuri has continued with great care so that it is possible when wandering casually along the streets of the city to feel as the Pompeian felt and to see what he saw.

The Pompeian lived well before the two days of destructive terror. This petrified society, caught and pickled in volcanic ash, if not entirely typical, is a revelation of the wealth and splendour of Rome. Every luxury was available for the aristocratic citizens as a glance at the layout of the city shows.

Roughly shaped in a deep ellipse, it is divided into four unequal sections by the crossing main routes of the Via di Stabia and Via dell'Abbondanza. Running parallel to the latter is the Via di Nola which makes a further sub-division. The city is then divided by a crossing network of roads parallel to the main streets. The largest building is the amphitheatre which occupies the far south-eastern corner. This arena, larger than any in contemporary Rome, was the centre of the distressing, cruel gladiatorial combats and animal fights which so delighted the Roman citizen. Pompeii's amphitheatre could hold sixteen thousand people (thirteen thousand seated), and could be covered with a vast canvas awning as a protection from the beating sun under which the contestants sweated, fought and died before the uninhibited enthusiasm of almost the whole population. This corner of the town became the sports centre, and next to the theatre was the *palestra*, a large colonnaded square in which all the youths practised gymnastics or swam in the great pool which was over ninety feet long. Near the southern gate, Porta di Stabia, were the theatres, one large and open air, the other small and covered, and both in constant popular use. Further west, at the lower end of the Via dell'Abbondanza was the Forum, the centre of civic life. A long rectangle, colonnaded on all sides and prohibited to chariots and horses, this was where the citizen paid his taxes, conducted his business at the wine taverns, watched bull fights, bought at the open-air market, heard political speeches or merely strolled at ease in conversation with his friends. The *basilica*, law court, was on one corner, while next to it was the Temple of Apollo. At the other end was the impressive Temple of Jupiter, the supreme deity, whose importance was emphasised by two great triumphal arches which flanked it. Nearby were the local administration buildings and the council chamber. At the time of the catastrophe this great community centre had not been completely rebuilt after the serious earthquake which had occurred sixteen years earlier.

Near the Forum were the luxurious public baths with steaming compartments in which the sedentary citizen removed the pounds his easy life had deposited. The *lupanare*, brothels, discreetly but not anonymously situated nearby, were a popular mecca then as now.

The remains of five other temples are found in Pompeii, which were built at various times through the preceding six centuries; perhaps the most interesting of which is the Temple of Isis, since it is the best preserved of all the temples of this ancient cult.

Perhaps most interesting and valuable to us in our attempts to understand the

*Fiorelli begins the first systematic work of excavation in 1860*

*Life in Pompeii*



life of Pompeii are the private houses, in which the real wealth and luxury of the Pompeian can best be seen.

In these the owner was indeed master, and the whole planning was designed for seclusion and self-containment. Centrally grouped around a courtyard, they presented an austere façade which disguised the private luxury of the interiors. Often, for the Roman always had an eye for business, the front was used as a small shop, selling fruit or wines from the owner's estates, on a counter constructed in the front room. The owner on his return from business or enjoyment could pass his own archway and enter a small, absolute monarchy. Waited on by slaves whose very lives might indirectly depend on his good will, he lived in ease and plenty. His meals were taken in the *triclinia*, rooms furnished with long couches along three sides, richly upholstered and covered with soft cushions. A small table stood in the centre, and slaves served from the fourth side the varied dishes in many courses: fish, oysters, chicken, game, venison, pork, all manner of fruit, bread similar to our own wholemeal, served with wine from the master's own vineyards.

In the evenings, by the light of numerous flat oil lamps, the master talked with his friends, did the household or estate accounts, or was entertained with music or recitation. He was surrounded with household utensils very like our own. Furniture was made of wood with finely wrought bronze fittings. Most of the objects were beautifully decorated; tableware with raised reliefs of mythological scenes or simple geometric or organic repeating patterns; spoons, scissors, knives, and razors were similarly treated.

The numerous erotic wall paintings found indicate the room in which the owner enjoyed the pleasures of the couch. Roman society did not regard the representation of the act of love with the same distaste that a legacy of Christian restraint has engendered in us; he delighted in physical passion and expressed it no less. The painters represented it without inhibition and often with sly libidinous humour which was intended to increase the passionate senses of its observers, and no doubt succeeded.

There are a number of different styles of domestic architecture to be seen in Pompeii, the earlier houses, like the House of the Faun, being the most spacious and magnificent: for as the population increased ground became more precious, and the spaces between the great houses were filled with smaller shops and dwellings which tended to spoil the spacious clarity of the planning. The large houses were forced to increase in height, and this affected the simplicity of the groundplan and tended towards a less satisfactory architectural unit.

When the power of Rome had been established in the area, the wealthy citizens acquired the confidence to build outside the walls of the city, and it is here that some of the more magnificent villas are located. One of the largest and most interesting, close to the Gate of Herculaneum, is the Villa of the Mysteries, some paintings from which are illustrated on Plates 9 and 10.

Such buildings began to appear everywhere, so that, as Pliny remarks, 'The villas stand extremely thick upon that beautiful coast.' In nearly all of these, as in the houses in the town itself, were to be found series of remarkable, rich paintings. It is this series of paintings which mostly provides us with evidence of Roman secular painting, as well as some indication of the style of Greek painting.

One of the continual interests to historians of art is to discover what Greek painting was like. How well could the Greeks draw? What understanding had they of perspective, and how accurate was their use of it? How was their colour used? How effective was their handling of tone—if indeed they used it? Had they a knowledge of aerial perspective? All these and a number of other specialist considerations remain unanswered, since, as far as is known, not one single painting from classical Greece has survived. If one were to be discovered now it would, despite its tremendous interest, provide a dangerous breeding ground of generalisations about Greek painting, so little knowledge do we have.

The interest is natural, since the whole course of Western art is so obviously indebted to Greek achievement in all its other manifestations that it is likely to owe as much in painting. The possibility still exists, however, that the achievements of the Romans are greater than is generally credited. The evidence of pottery decoration, copies of ancient paintings, descriptions of them written at the time, all these seem to indicate that refinement and accomplishment were present in Greek painting—but we do not know.

Part of the considerable value of Pompeian painting lies in the extent in which the finds create an atmosphere of knowledge in which certain general inferences may be drawn.

Greek influence in Pompeii was considerable: Greek artists were employed who were working in the tradition of Greek art; there was a long period of Greek settlement in the area; subject matter frequently dealt with Greek mythological material;

#### *Styles of architecture in Pompeii*

#### *The influence of Greek painting in Pompeii*



Roman art generally was an eager adoption of Greek art. Thus we may say with confidence that although we may expect to find differences, the paintings at Pompeii will indicate something of the nature of Greek painting.

It appears that the considerable competence in perspective found in Pompeii was to be found in Greek art, and it is probable that this was founded on observation rather than theory. The paintings in Pompeii are not drawn in accurate perspective, as may be seen in the numerous architectural fantasies painted in so many private houses. Even though, in the later period, they achieve an almost Baroque freedom in *trompe-l'œil* effects, measurement shows inconsistencies which result from no overriding theory.

The same is true of anatomy. The drawing of the human figure is the result of external observation rather than internal knowledge of the articulation of the body.

On these points Roman art reflects common ground with Greek. On others the parallel is not as clear. The handling of light, so effective in some of the paintings we illustrate (e. g. Plate 1, 4 and 5), is an example. The Roman delight in pleasure of the senses, his diminished concern with the ideal, his relaxation of absolute standards, may have tended to a less rigorous application of the rules of paintings adopted by the Greeks. The sweetly idyllic nature of some Roman painting suggests that at least the creation of a loose Romanticism was the intention. A highly casual light effect such as we find does not fit closely with the Greek spirit as we can discern it in, say, the form of a Greek *kylix*, and we may doubt whether the Greeks were interested in the accidental effects of light and its emotional implications. This pictorial development we may be inclined to consider a Roman development.

As a revelation of Roman society, of course, the paintings are of unique value. In fact, we could hardly find an art as completely effective in revealing the society which produced it.

We must beware, however, of applying our own Christian attitudes to the question, for it must be remembered that the Romans were a polytheistic community, and the awe and reverence which we tend to bring to any assessment of works of art—a Renaissance legacy—is foreign to the Roman, for whom it was an everyday object without totemistic suggestions.

The paintings vary greatly in subject matter and quality. As might be expected, the larger houses, the property of the aristocracy, and the public buildings contain the finest and most important. Most houses, nevertheless, contain some painting; in fact, it was the habit of the Romans to decorate all their interiors, not only the walls but also the ceilings and indeed the outside of the buildings as well. The floors were covered in mosaics, frequently in black and white geometric patterns which acted as a foil to the great strength of colour in the paintings.

It is impossible to distinguish the work of individual artists in the paintings of the Campania, and there is only one signed work in Pompeii. Certain common characteristics are discernible, but since the artists were undoubtedly closely bound into a guild system which laid down the nature of the treatment of subject it is impossible to distinguish individual work and where it originates. Clearly the influence of Greek painting is present, and a number of the artists were Greek. At the same time it seems likely that the guilds were responsible for forming a style which, found everywhere in Pompeii and Herculaneum, has a vivid, rich, free, 'impressionist' quality and an aspect of common humanity which was contrary to Greek idealism. It may be said that where the formal elements of the painting, particularly with classical subjects, predominate the influence of Greek art is strong, and where they are at a minimum the growth of the indigenous Campanian style is apparent.

The subject matter of the paintings found could hardly be more varied. In a society with many gods derived from the Greek myths, it is hardly surprising to find that the lives and adventures of these gods are frequently portrayed. The story of Hercules, with its human-god relationship, was always popular, and the name Herculaneum commemorates the association. Thus he is a frequent subject, and we have illustrated aspects of his story in Plates 2 and 6.

In the various rooms of the house paintings reflect their use, e.g. still-life groups showing the pleasures of the table in the dining room. The bedroom contains erotic subjects or delicate vistas of imagined landscape; the reception rooms, rich architectural motifs, dramatic scenes or mythological subjects. Elsewhere we find portraits, bird and animal paintings, everyday scenes and battle subjects. From the mass of information obtained scholars have reconstructed the picture of the life and thought of Roman society with great conviction.

The influence of all this painting on subsequent art has been profound and continuous. Although this was a pagan community, there is evidence of a small

#### *Differences in Greek and Roman art*

#### *The character of Pompeian painting*



group of Christians in Pompeii and Herculaneum who, with other small groups elsewhere, carried the Roman tradition into the early Christian art of the Catacombs. Through the Dark Ages, though overlaid by religious mysticism and the necessities of hieratic treatment, the effect persisted. During the Renaissance the revived spirit of classical enquiry incorporated and adapted the dimly felt earlier art, so that remarkable parallels appear.

In the 18th century a further impetus was given to the effect of Roman painting through the rediscovery of the buried cities and the treasures of art that they contained. The work of Adam in England and the Neo-classicists of early 19th-century France owe much to the enthusiasm they aroused.

Since then the careful excavations that are still being made, while not arousing the same urgency, nevertheless act as a constant reminder of classic art and the cultural heritage it represents.

The paintings found in Pompeii and Herculaneum are in a remarkable state of preservation, made the more notable when we remember that they have been buried in volcanic ash for nearly 2,000 years and were, immediately prior to this, subjected to earthquake, fire and water. It must be remembered, too, that the condensation of steam during the eruption resulted in torrential rain which, in the damaged buildings, must have left a damp coating of volcanic sludge over the surface of some paintings, while elsewhere a trapped dry heat would have been engendered in buried rooms. Poisonous gases must also have attacked the surfaces. That so many paintings have survived, apparently little damaged, is therefore nothing short of miraculous and at the same time a tribute to the technique used.

It is known that the paintings range over a period of two hundred years, and they, not surprisingly, include a number of different techniques. We have only imperfect knowledge of most of these, although the term 'fresco' is commonly applied to them all. Properly 'fresco' refers to wall painting done in wet lime plaster. This is true fresco (*fresco buono*) and is a very limiting and difficult process suited only to certain climates and demanding great technical ability. Done properly it is a permanent method with considerable attraction. It was used extensively during the Renaissance, the most impressive achievement being the Sistine Chapel ceiling by Michelangelo. *Fresco secco* is a method of painting on a lime plaster which has set. This was also used in the Renaissance. Since it is bound to the plaster and not incorporated into its structure, *fresco secco* does not usually have the same permanence. Both these methods appear to have been used with others in combination. The method in which it is generally believed that most of the Pompeian frescoes were painted is known as *stucco lustro*, but there is the possibility that an encaustic, or heated wax, process was used. The peculiarly hard glossy surface that so many of these paintings have, has presented problems of analysis, and suggests the use of wax treated with hot irons.

It is probably true that these are the three principal methods used: fresco (in the form of *stucco lustro*), encaustic and tempera. *Stucco lustro* required the careful preparation of the wall beforehand with successive layers of plaster over a roughened brick base. The final three or four coats were a fine plaster containing marble dust, and the last one was coloured. The colours used, according to Pliny, were earth and mineral in origin, and they were ironed onto a wet ground without pressure, the medium used to bind them being a mixture of soap and potash. Most of these paintings were done *in situ*, but some of the more important central panels were painted upon an easel on wood and fixed later with iron clamps. Few of the latter have survived owing to the rotting of the wood. The painting was coated with wax as a protection six weeks after it was finished.

The encaustic method is known incompletely, the formula having been lost in the Middle Ages. Pliny has, however, left some guiding information which indicates that the colour was applied either with hot wax, which hardened as it cooled, or as a cold paste, which was inusted later with a heated spatula. The quality of this method is extreme durability combined with freshness and liveliness of colour which does not darken or change with time. Evidence of this is provided by the Fayum mummy portraits from Egypt which date from the 1st century A. D.

Tempera is essentially the use of an emulsion as the binding medium of the colour to its ground, but in Pompeii, as elsewhere, the term included what is more accurately described as distemper, the colour here being bound with a glue. This method is not very permanent and is very susceptible to damp; thus it was only used for the cheaper work in the poorer houses and where a quick inexpensive method of limited durability was required.

It is however the great achievement of Pompeian painting that the permanence of most of the painting methods enables us so completely to study and appreciate the character of this rich society.

#### *Technique of the wall paintings*

#### *Three principal methods used*



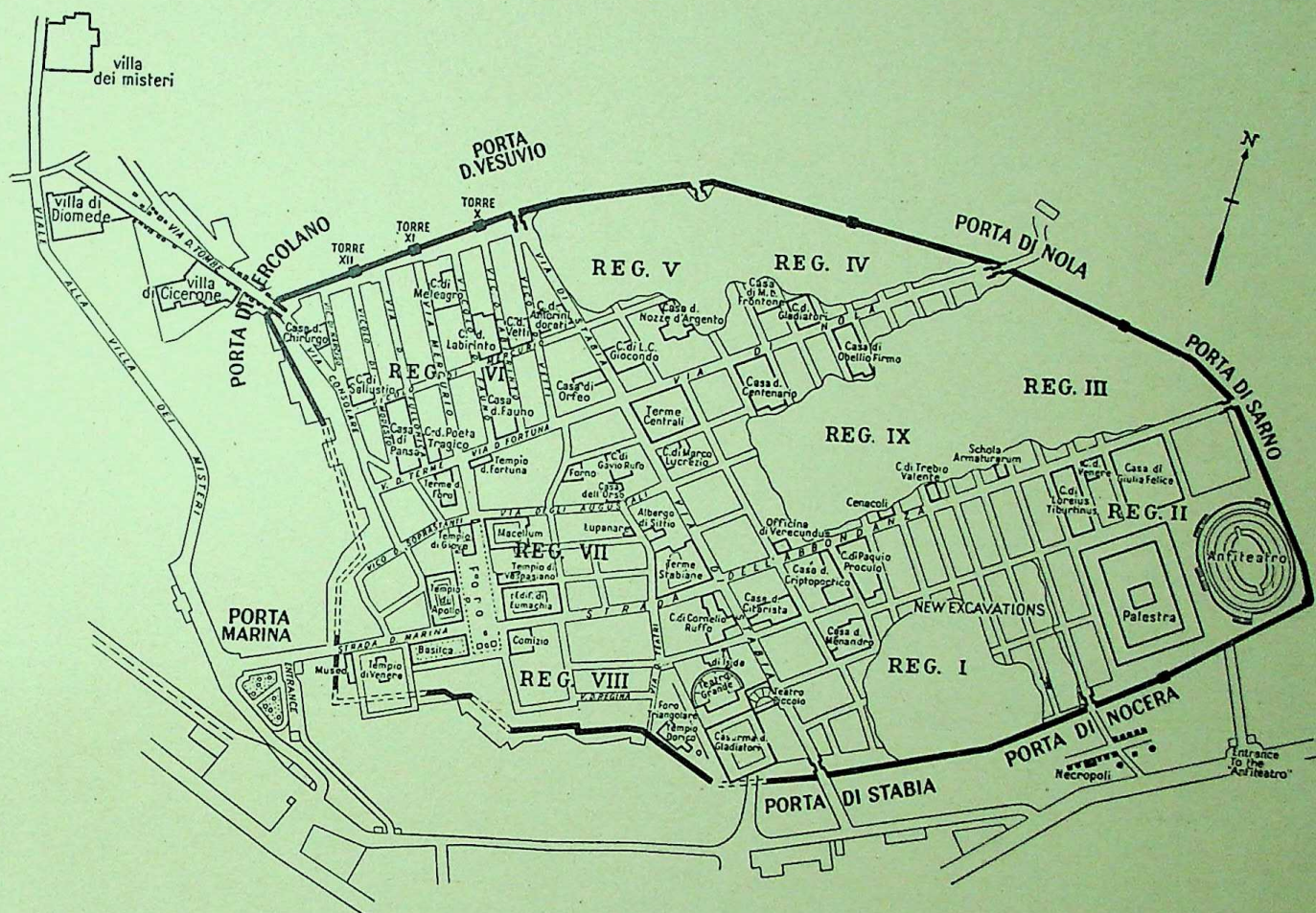




Plate 2 *Naples, National Museum. From Herculaneum*

## Hercules and Telephus

Herculaneum, as might be expected, contained a number of paintings of the legend of Hercules and his labours.

One part of his story is treated allegorically in this impressive panel from the so-called Basilica of Hercules.

It occurred in Arcadia, represented here by the large, almost grotesque, female figure whose fixed stare and majestic unconcern dominate the scene. Auge, the daughter of Aleus, king of Tegea in Arcadia, and a priestess in the temple, had been threatened with death by her father should she lose her chastity. Hercules, however, seduced Auge in a drunken excess in the temple itself, and although Auge escaped death their son Telephus was exposed on Mount Parthenos. He was saved by being suckled by a doe, and when he grew up was prevented from marrying his mother by the intervention of Hercules, who recognised him.

Telephus is shown here being cared for by the doe who licks his leg in an affectionate gesture. Hercules regards him fixedly in a typical pose, athletic and mature. Behind him the winged female figure is an allegorical presentation of Mount Parthenos who looks with affection at the group in the bottom left corner and points as if indicating to Hercules the care she has taken of them. It is suggested that the painting may be in honour of Pergamo, a city which Telephus is supposed to have founded. The painting varies in quality from the heavy grandeur and still formality of Arcadia and Hercules to the careful sensitivity of the doe and Telephus. The spontaneity of treatment of the satyr with the pipes, supporting Arcadia, should be noted, and the still-life group on the bench seat may be compared with the examples illustrated in Plates 11 and 12. There is a sense of abundance and richness in this still life which indicates the Arcadian idyllic atmosphere.







Plate 3 *Naples, National Museum. From Pompeii*

## Pan and his music

Pan is often portrayed as a lithe, supple youth of considerable physical attraction, as in this fine painting, or as a hideously repellent half-goat, half-man. He is supposed to have been born with horns, tail, beard and the legs of a goat, which, perhaps not unnaturally, so frightened his mother that she ran from him, and he was taken to Olympus for the amusement of the gods. In this painting the small horns on his forehead and the goat at his feet identify him.

His character does not seem to have been particularly attractive, and he claimed to have seduced most of the females he encountered. He was lazy and loved to sleep his days away in some secluded grove in Arcadia where he had chosen to live. If disturbed he uttered a shout of such intensity that it struck terror in all who heard it. He acted as shepherd to the flocks and herds on the hillsides and was part of the fertility ceremonies. Due to the unfortunate experience he had with Hercules and Omphale (see note to Plate 6) he insisted on his devotees appearing naked before him, and he is usually thus portrayed himself.

On one occasion he attempted to seduce the chaste Syrinx who ran and hid from him in the reeds by the river Ladon, becoming herself a reed. Disconsolate, Pan picked several reeds at random and made them into a Pan-pipe, or syrinx, which he played continually and which is associated with him in most paintings. He is playing it here to some of the wood nymphs.

This painting is one of a series the particular characteristic of which is to create an idyllic landscape with figures. The quality of the drawing is exceptional, and the figure of Pan is of great conviction, its deep, burnt colour providing the focus of the whole painting. The loose suppleness of the athletic torso is of classical type, as is the figure on the right. The poetic glow of sunlight pervading the scene is finely handled.







Plate 4 *Pompeii*

## Landscape with man and goat

This mountain landscape is of an idyllic sacred type in which it is usual to find a small rural temple close by a sacred tree and the image of the god of the woods or the hills. It is the landscape which is important in this painting rather than the figure of the shepherd or the goat which is being pushed reluctantly towards the temple. The treatment of the figure is 'impressionist' in the extreme and of a kind often found in Roman painting: long, sensitive strokes sketch in, with a deft touch, the legs of both figure and goat, while the body is given volume with the simplest means. The effect is to increase the delicacy and lightness of the scene and makes it a fine example of wall decoration.







Plate 5 *Pompeii*

## Landscape

This is a more expansive landscape than in the previous plate, and the use of perspective effectively expresses the idyllic nature of the scene. The misty mountain in the right distance shows a sense of aerial perspective which indicates the unusual accomplishment of the artist. Stylistically the painting is similar to the preceding one and seems to follow the theme of the lost goat. Other similar elements are also present: the sacred tree enclosed in the four-columned building, the small temples and the mountain background. This painting, however, shows more interest in the natural scene. The small island, accessible only through the delicate bridge, is drawn carefully, as are the cattle wading in the water on the right. The painting of the goat and figures is done with the same technical virtuosity, and the feeling of atmosphere is even more effectively rendered.







Plate 6 *Naples, National Museum. From Pompeii*

## Hercules and Omphale

This is another episode in the story of Hercules—and one which does no great credit to any of those concerned.

The three principal figures represented in this painting are Hercules, Omphale and Pan in his *alter ego*, Priapus. Hercules was sold as a slave, namelessly, by Hermes, patron of important financial transactions, to Omphale, queen of Lydia in Asia. Omphale recognised his potential both as a defender and, more importantly, as a lover. Hercules stayed with her for a period variously said to be a year or three years, and during this time he performed great service in ridding the land of bandits which infested it. He captured the twin brothers known as Passalus and Acmon, who were regarded as the most accomplished cheats and liars known to mankind; killed and decapitated the murderous farmer Lityerses; and finally shot and killed the enormous serpent who lived by the river Sagaris and preyed on men and crops. The grateful Omphale, having finally discovered Hercules's identity, sent him back to Tiryns with many gifts. (The constellation Ophiuchus records the victory.) Hercules was also successful as Omphale's lover, and she had three children by him. She was supposed to have had such an influence over him that she persuaded him to dress as a woman in jewelled necklaces and rich turban and cloak and to sit teasing wool with other Ionian girls, while she herself adopted his lion's pelt and club. It appears however that this story grew, fostered by Pan, out of only one episode in their association. One day when Hercules and Omphale were visiting the vineyards they were noticed by Pan from the hillside. She was dressed in a rich purple gown, and Pan, ever eager for conquest, fell in love with her and resolved to have her. In their place of assignation, a secluded grove, for amusement Hercules and Omphale changed clothes, and after dining they vowed a dawn sacrifice to Dionysus which required marital purity during the previous night. They therefore retired to separate couches without changing clothes again. In the night Pan crept into the glade and finding the soft clothes he took to be Omphale's he undid the bottom of the couch and began to worm his way in. Hercules woke and with a strong kick shot Pan across the grove where he nursed his bruises, much to the amusement of the other two. As a reprisal Pan spread the story of Hercules's domination. Incidentally, it was so that such mistakes could not recur that Pan enjoined nakedness on his devotees. In this painting Omphale is represented wearing the lion pelt and carrying the club, while Hercules is supported in a drunken state by a leering Priapus. The small figures add a touch of humour: one whistles like an irritating fly in Hercules's ear; another is amused at his reflection in the base of a *skyphos*; while the third, greatly daring, lifts Priapus's cloak and gazes in amazement at his great genitals. The whole painting has sly richness and voluptuousness which differs from the other paintings in this book.







Plate 7 Pompeii. From a house in Region I.

## Scene from a comedy

The enthusiasm of the ancient societies of Greece and Rome for the theatre was boundless, and few cities of any standing were without at least one. Gladiatorial combat provided the principal form of entertainment, and in a luxury-loving society such as we find in Pompeii it is no surprise to find that there were two main theatres in the fashionable centre of the city, as well as a number of places where itinerant actors and mimers performed, leaving records of their programmes incised into the walls. The main theatres were large, one open-air, the other an odeum, and both linked along the side of the *piazza* with a covered colonnade: they were beautifully sited in view of sea and mountain.

It is not surprising that scenes from plays figure in the wall paintings of a society which so clearly depicts itself in

all its aspects, and there are a large number of small scenes, such as the one we illustrate, on the walls of the smaller houses.

It is often difficult in fact to distinguish between the stage presentation and the direct expression of the myth, for a high

percentage of the plays performed were of course concerned with the Greek and Roman myths, as were the paintings (cf. *Hercules and Omphale*, *Hercules and Telephus*, *Birth of Venus*).

It must be remembered that the actors used masks, and from this painting it is clear that they were highly expressive and elaborate.

The scene here represented, a familiar one in various forms in all drama, is found both at Herculaneum and Pompeii. It is the negotiation by an emissary with a courtesan for her favours.

The go-between on the left, probably a servant or maybe the 'tutor' of some rich man's son, while making a gesture warding off the evil spirit, is making an aside comment to the audience, probably about the doubtful pleasures of the lady in question. She, heavily powdered as was the custom, looks displeased and shrewish, while her servant seems to be reminding her what her display of bad temper may cost her. The whole composition is simply but effectively rendered, and the awkward splay-footed stance of the gross messenger contrasts sharply with the precise formal pose of the two figures on the right. It is a particularly vivid presentation of what was doubtless a familiar situation, as much in life as in the theatre.







## The birth of Venus

Venus, the Aphrodite of Greek myth, is the goddess of love, fruitfulness and regeneration. She figures largely in the story of gods on Olympus and caused a remarkable amount of trouble to both gods and mortals.

Aphrodite was amorous and lustful, and most of the stories associated with her name involve seduction and rape. The story of her origin is responsible for her connection with regeneration. In the Greek myth of creation, Mother Earth bore her son, Uranus, while she slept. Uranus had a son, Cronus, who rebelled against him, and, catching him while he slept, castrated him and flung his genitals into the sea. From the foam sprang Aphrodite, a symbol of re-creation from dismemberment, and riding on a scallop shell she came to the island of Cythera, which is south of Greece. She found the island too small and passed on to Cyprus, establishing her authority in Paphos, which became the principal seat of her worship. Her shell was carried on the gentle, urging breath of Zephyrus.

In the painting shown here she is led by a dolphin, which is one of her symbols, and the small winged figure urging the shell forward may be Zephyrus. Aphrodite lies on the shell in a typical voluptuous pose with remarkable suggestions of later painting, showing the continuing influence of this type of figure.

It might be mentioned that this is one of the recent finds in the new excavations. The pose is notably similar to Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *Olympia*, the last resembling this painting in the position of the head, its character, and the inclusion of a necklace, more than the *Venus of Urbino*, its ostensible model.

The painting itself is extremely interesting. There is a fresh delicacy in the drawing and a sense of atmosphere and space; the figures glide over the unruffled surface of the calm sea; so calm that it gives a reflection. Most of the drawing is relatively accurate and naturalistic. The curious exception is the raised leg of Aphrodite which seems almost an afterthought—and not a particularly happy one.

Possibly the artist was not satisfied with the leg being lost behind the other one and felt that the large dark shape of the shell needed breaking up. The head of Aphrodite is that of a typical intelligent Roman lady, and the hair style is a fashionable one.







## Silenus and satyrs (detail)

This and the next plate show details from the great series of paintings in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii.

The villa in fact owes its name to the paintings, for they are of the Dionysiac mystery rites.

The villa is on the outskirts of Pompeii, near one of the gates, and was obviously the out-of-town house of one of the important and wealthy citizens of this aristocratic city.

The family undoubtedly owned another house in the town but probably spent most of the time in the beautiful villa away from the noise of the city. It has a most magnificent view across the bay and is spaciouly planned and luxuriously furnished.

The painter imported to decorate the interior was of great ability and must have been very expensive. The work dates from the great period of Pompeian painting—the 'Second Style'. It has been said that the paintings and other decorations doubtless owe much to the *domina*, the lady of the house, and she must have been of sensitive taste and aristocratic origin. Her name is not known, but there is a portrait in the villa which is believed to be of her. The probability is that she took part in the Dionysiac rites in her house. These are of mysterious character, and although the general outlines of the rites are understood the details are not. The rites were in any case forbidden, the Senate having propagated severe sanctions against the cult on several occasions. While the Dionysiac series provide the most important paintings in the villa, others are found throughout the building of a painted architectural character.

The series are not separate pictures but a continuous frieze running round the walls from about three feet upwards.

They depict the more important aspects of the ritual in a beautifully rhythmic composition, the whole being held together by a rich vermilion background, and the principal episodes are indicated by a vertical black band division. The rites themselves were initiatory and involved the introduction of a young girl into the band of followers of Dionysus, the amatory god of wine, ultimately leading to a mystic marriage.

In this detail Silenus is shown surrounded by satyrs. He is an integral part of Dionysus's life. He is supposed to have been the son of Pan by one of the wood nymphs and to have acted as tutor and companion to Dionysus when he was sent on his wanderings by Hermes. The satyrs were his sons and joined with him and the Maenads, the wild mountain mad-women, in the revels, uninhibited and orgiastic, which Dionysus sponsored wherever he went. Here, one of the satyrs is shown drinking deeply or crystal-gazing in a large jar, while another holds up a grotesque mask which was part of the comic plays in which Silenus was a figure of fun. The gross Silenus, always drunken, leans heavily against the pillar and casually points to the next scene in the ritual which is the revelation of the mystic basket (*mystica vannus*) in which is concealed, under a symbolic purple cloth, the essential phallus. The characteristics of dissipation, resignation and arrogant power are acutely expressed in the bemused head and coarse body of Silenus, and the willful, wicked irresponsibility of the satyr is caught in the cunning side glance of the figure holding the mask.







Plate 10 *Pompeii. Villa of the Mysteries*

## Girl undergoing the ordeal (detail)

In this second detail the distressing central part of the rite, the flagellation, is depicted. The young girl cowers from the long lash in the lap of a matronly friend, her tight-closed eyes and matted hair showing very clearly the pain she feels. This contrasts with the orgiastic freedom of the dance of the initiated girl, a bacchante, who swings her veil in rhythm with her high-held castanets. The lithe outline of this figure, shown sharply against the dark form behind, gives a poignant sorrow to the heavy, drooping shapes of the suffering girl. There is a deep sympathy and understanding in this painting which gives its creator a high position among the painters of antiquity.







## Still life with trampoliere

Still-life painting is commonly thought to be of more recent origin and is associated with the French and Flemish schools of painting particularly. This and the following plate effectively dispose of this notion; in fact, there are examples to be found even earlier in Greece and Egypt. It was a quite common practice with mosaicists to construct still-life subjects

on areas of flooring. There are a number of still-life subjects in Roman art, but most of them are encountered in the painting of the Campania; by far the largest proportion of these is to be found in Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae.

The particular example illustrated here is typical. The objects are shown isolated, and although there is some indication of a consistent light source it is not a group in the sense that it is conceived as one subject. The fan-shaped molluscs on the upper level are painted with an almost casual freedom, a Hals-like looseness of technique, while the carafe on the right is painted carefully and prosaically. The painting is completed with the living bird which is much more effectively rendered in both free and careful paint. Curious to our eyes, the bird is known to be of the 'trampoliere' group.

This is the group of wading birds (grallatorial) and includes storks and spoonbills.

It is not surprising that these paintings should not have the integrated form of composition with which we are familiar, since they arose more from a desire to remind the pleasure-loving Roman of the joys of the table and the varied richness of the food available than from any aesthetic considerations of picture making. In fact these paintings were considered to be of minor importance, although it is clear that they were very popular; so much so that one painter of the *genre* commanded higher prices than his more famous contemporaries.

It is from these paintings that much useful information about the food and drink of the Romans is obtained, since it is clear that they are observation and not invented compositions or relationships.







Plate 12 *Pompeii*

## Still life with partridge and pomegranate

Here, as in the previous illustration, there is no real attempt to relate the objects painted into a unified composition. Although there is a cast-shadow effect from the pomegranate in the foreground it is not sufficient to reveal the exact position of the partridge in relation to it, and although there is a delicate suggestion of some mound on which the second fruit is placed there is no spacial statement clearly made about their relative positions. The whole charm of this painting lies in its treatment of the individual objects and the freshness of the technique. It has the same casual assurance that can be seen in the previous plate and leads one to the realisation that this was not, for the Roman patrons of the artist, anything other than a pleasant and temporary decoration for their villas. It may be said however that the sure touch and easy flow of the drawing betokens a background of experience and training of a high representational standard.











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